

Oklahoma and Texas Completion Policies for Community Colleges

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Abstract

This study measured the effectiveness of and differences between Oklahoma's Brain Gain and Texas' Closing the Gaps policies to enhance degree completion of students at community colleges. Descriptive statistics and independent-samples t tests were conducted utilizing data from community colleges' 3-year graduation rates from the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems database for benchmark year 2002 and years 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012. The results showed that both states' total, black, and white community college 3-year graduation rates decreased from 2002 to 2012. Only Oklahoma's Hispanic graduation rate increased while Texas' Hispanic graduation rate decreased during the same period. No statistically significant differences were found between total, Black, Hispanic, and White community college graduation rates in Oklahoma and Texas. Findings revealed that the policies implemented in Oklahoma and Texas did not cause the desired impact at their states' community colleges. Recommendations for policy and future research are provided.

Keywords: *community colleges, completion policies, graduation rates*

Introduction

Recently access to U. S. higher education has improved substantially. Between 1992 and 2012, for example, enrollment in 4-year institutions grew by 65% from 8,764,969 to 13,478,846. (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013a) This growth is remarkable but outstripped by the growth in community college enrollment at almost 80% in the same period.

According to Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013), society benefits when individuals earn associate degrees through reduced unemployment rates, increased income potential, elevated volunteer participation among others. In 2012, individuals who had earned an associate degree had an unemployment rate 4% less than those who had only earned a high school diploma. The median earning rate of associate degree graduates was 27% higher than high school graduates. In 2012, 29% of individuals who had earned 2-year degrees volunteered with outside organizations in comparison to 17% of high school graduates.

According to Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson (2011), over 70% of high school graduates enter postsecondary education within 2 years of completing high school, but only about half of full-time college students finish a credential within 6 years. Completion rates in 2-year colleges are more problematic: community colleges see only about one third of their students complete a credential (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

National, state, and institutional efforts to improve completion rates have become prominent. Among them, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), created to improve pre-K-20 education in the South through policy advice (SREB, n.d.), launched an initiative to elevate the educational achievement of its 16 member states. SREB set its Challenge to Lead goals in 2002, including criteria to measure states' progress. Three enrollment goals proposed to exceed national averages for the number of students attending 2- and 4-year institutions, the percentage of freshmen continuing into the sophomore year, and the graduation rates at all levels (SREB, 2002).

Before the Challenge to Lead, two SREB members, Oklahoma and Texas, had created comparable policies in 1999 and 2000. Oklahoma's Brain Gain and Texas' Closing the Gaps sought to increase the percentage of adults holding postsecondary credentials through greater college enrollment, retention, and graduation. Both states offered similar financial assistance via Oklahoma's Promise and the TEXAS Grant programs. The two initiatives were implemented over 10 years ago, but little attention has been paid to measuring their impact on community college graduation rates or to comparing their effectiveness. This study addressed this gap by investigating the impact of Oklahoma's Brain Gain and Texas' Closing the Gaps on community college graduation rates longitudinally.

Oklahoma's Brain Gain and Oklahoma's Promise

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) initiated Brain Gain 2010 in 1999 to improve associate's and bachelor's graduation rates. Regents identified factors limiting student success: higher education costs, financial assistance, undergraduate students' extended work schedules, part-time enrollment, and greater reliance on part-time faculty (Oklahoma State Board of Regents [OSRHE], 1999).

Brain Gain 2010 set requirements for improving student enrollment and graduation. High schools had to upgrade curriculum and inform families better about higher education opportunities. The policy required enhancements on campuses: increased financial aid; more online courses; increased faculty salaries; publication of student retention and graduation rates; and enhanced student advisement (OSRHE, 1999). Brain Gain 2010 expanded the merit-based scholarship, Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP), begun in 1996 and later renamed Oklahoma's Promise. Students with family income below \$50,000 could apply for the scholarship in the 8th-10th grades and were obligated to complete the required high school curriculum with a 2.5 grade average. Having met scholarship requirements, students were eligible to receive full tuition at any Oklahoma public institution for up to 5 years or to apply the amount at an Oklahoma private institution (OSRHE, 2013a).

Texas' Closing the Gaps and the TEXAS Grant

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) approved Closing the Gaps in 2000 with a goal of improving college enrollment, retention, and completion for Black, Hispanic, and White students. Originally, the plan targeted increases in community college associate's degrees awarded from 23,000 in 2000 to 30,000 by 2010 and 34,600 by 2015 (THECB, 2001). Due to state population growth, the plan was revised in 2006. The THECB raised goals to 43,400 associate's degrees by 2010 and 55,500 by 2015 and required increasing certificates, associate's, and bachelor's degrees to African Americans from 16,000 to 24,300 by 2015 and to Hispanics from 50,000 to 67,000 by 2015 (THECB, 2009).

In 1999, the Texas Legislature enacted the Toward EXcellence, Access, & Success (TEXAS) Grant Program which awarded qualified students financial assistance. To retain the grant, students must meet their institution's Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) standards and complete 75% of the hours attempted with an overall gpa of 2.5 by the end of year two. The grant could be continued for 5 years for a 4-year bachelor's degree and for 6 years for a 5-year program for a maximum of 150 hours (THECB, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Oklahoma and Texas pioneer policies and specifically to compare completion rates at their respective community colleges. Accordingly, the following research questions guided the study:

1. Are there differences in community college graduation rates by ethnicity in Oklahoma and Texas for in 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012 since the implementation of Oklahoma's Brain Gain policy in 1999 and Texas' Closing the Gaps policy in 2000?
2. Are there differences in community college graduation rates by ethnicity in 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012 between Texas and Oklahoma?

Method

This study used a quantitative research design with a secondary dataset from the NCES' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) database. Cook and Pullaro (2010) stated that the IPEDS database contains the best data for comparisons of similar institutions' graduation rate factors since all higher education institutions receiving federal funding must report to NCES annually on selected indicators. For this study, institutions failing to report Black, Hispanic, and White cohort graduation rates for benchmark year 2002 and years 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012 were eliminated, leaving a sample of 16 Oklahoma and 77 Texas community colleges. Cohort data for all groups were the total number of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students who completed an associate's degrees in 3 years or less.

Researchers chose descriptive and independent-samples *t* tests to measure the effectiveness of Oklahoma and Texas policies for community college retention and

graduation rates. The descriptive statistics consisted of mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum percentage graduation rates of the grand total, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites for Oklahoma and Texas for the years 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012. Researchers selected the 2002 IPEDS 150% cohort graduation rate data to benchmark the study, because it was the first year that the data were collected (National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, 2011). Independent-samples *t* tests served to evaluate whether differences existed in the graduation rates for the grand total, Black, Hispanic, and White students at 2-year colleges between Texas and Oklahoma for 2002 through 2012. The Levene test was utilized to determine the homogeneity of variance. A Bonferroni adjustment by the number of significance tests of the dependent variables was used to prevent a type 1 error. The alpha level of significance for this study was set at the .05 (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

Results

The results of the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses illuminated community college graduation rates in Oklahoma and Texas. Figure 1 shows Oklahoma's community college graduation rate decreased by 2.6% from 31.1% in 2002 to 28.4% in 2012 and Texas' decreased by 1.0% from 26.0% in 2002 to 25.0% in 2012. Figures 2, 3, and 4 provide comparative results for the Black, Hispanic, and White cohorts. In both Oklahoma and Texas, Black students showed a greater decrease than other ethnic groups. From 2002 to 2012, Black Oklahomans' completion rate declined by 1.1% while Texas' Black graduation rate dropped by 6.9%. Hispanic students' completion rates went up by .8% in Texas and increased by 1.3% in Oklahoma between 2002 and 2012. In the same period, graduation rates for White students declined by 2.4 % in Oklahoma and by .9% in Texas (See Appendix 2).

Oklahoma showed better community college graduation rates than Texas over the period. Independent-samples *t* tests were conducted to assess statistical significance of differences in graduation rates between the two states. Table 1 summarizes the results of independent-samples *t* tests. In 2002, graduation rates for Black community college students in Oklahoma ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 23.64$) were lower than in Texas ($M = 27.7$, $SD = 28.57$); and Hispanic graduation rates in Oklahoma ($M = 28.7$, $SD = 21.03$) were higher than in Texas ($M = 27.2$, $SD = 26.55$). White community college graduation rates in Oklahoma ($M = 33.2$, $SD = 21.62$) were higher than in Texas ($M = 26.7$, $SD = 26.99$). Oklahoma's total ($M = 31.1$, $SD = 20.52$) graduation rate was greater than Texas' ($M = 26.0$, $SD = 26.09$). However, there was no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between community college students in Oklahoma and Texas as confirmed by independent-samples *t* tests for 2006, 2008, and 2010 (See Appendix 1).

Analysis of 2012 data showed the same pattern: Black, Hispanic, and White community college students in Oklahoma graduated at higher rates than their Texas peers. Black students' graduation rates in Oklahoma ($M = 22.1$, $SD = 17.73$) were higher than in Texas ($M = 20.8$, $SD = 22.92$). Hispanic graduation rates were higher in Oklahoma ($M = 29.9$, $SD = 25.47$) than in Texas ($M = 28.0$, $SD = 25.42$). White community college graduation rates were greater in Oklahoma ($M = 30.8$, SD

= 17.83) than in Texas ($M = 25.8$, $SD = 21.76$) for the same year. Total community college graduation rates were higher in Oklahoma ($M = 28.4$, $SD = 18.33$) than in Texas ($M = 25.0$, $SD = 23.02$). However, the independent-samples t tests resulted in no significant difference in community college graduation rates between Oklahoma and Texas.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

The two states under study adopted similar policy goals to improve 2-year college completion rates and bolstered them with new financial aid programs at a time when both states were experiencing population growth (Table 2). Nevertheless, findings do not show advances in community college completion in either state. The decline in Black and White student completion rates in Texas carries long-term implications for that state's economy because the number of employment positions requiring an educated population is not being met by native Texans. As a result, employers have to search for individuals outside of the state for future employment. Similarly, the modest gains in Oklahoma's and Texas' Hispanic student success are not sufficient to meet the needs of both states (See Appendix 1).

According to NCES (2013b), the 2012 national community college graduation rate averages were 31% for all institutions, 26.4% for Black students, 36.4% for Hispanics students, and 30.2% for White students. Despite the SREB's Challenge to Lead goals and each state's policy initiatives, both states remained below the national averages except for Oklahoma's Whites in 2012.

This brief analysis suggests two important conclusions. First, there are many factors affecting student enrollment, retention, and degree completion beyond those envisioned by the states' goals and aid programs. These factors need to be identified, analyzed, and taken into account in future planning. Second, states and regional consortia such as the SREB should consider that policy levers are not sufficient to bring about timely change. For a state such as Texas, with a burgeoning Hispanic population whose youth tend not to go to college or not to complete a degree, more effective measures are needed to stem the loss of human capital.

Oklahoma and Texas can improve community college student retention and graduation rates through changes in student remediation and funding policies. In continued efforts toward these goals, both states joined the Complete College America (CCA) project established in 2009 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and USA Funds (CCA n.d. a.). CCA recommended revisions in college remediation programs because failure to complete these courses is a major cause of student attrition. The organization recommends limiting the number of remediation courses necessary for student success. Individuals, who do not possess the academic skills for successful completion of remedial courses, need to be guided to alternative career choices (CCA n.d. b.).

State appropriations like the Washington Student Achievement Initiative can assist in improving community college student retention and graduation. The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) approved a partnership with Community College Research Center at Columbia University to establish a formula funding program that provides allocations based on a point system for student completions: for example, of 15 and 30 college-level credits, of remedial English and math courses, of an Associate's degree, of an apprenticeship or certification, or of higher scores on standardized testing in math and English (SBCTC, 2014). In April 2012, the Oklahoma State Regents implemented a similar program allowing additional outcomes-based funding to institutions that have degree completion plans which meet CCA goals. Such goals include acceptable retention and graduation rates, suitable retention rates of Pell Grant recipients, appropriate 24-credit hour completion rates, and significant program accreditation (2013b.). In 2013, the Texas Legislature enacted an outcomes-based funding plan for community colleges in the state centered on student achievement. The plan provided each institution \$1 million in base funding. Then, the plan prescribed 90% of the state funding be awarded for enrollment while the remaining 10% be dependent upon satisfactory performance in student completion of developmental education, English and math courses, degrees and certificates, as well as college credits earned and student transfer to 4-year institutions. (Brown, 2013)

Recommendations for Further Research

The present study sought to assess the effectiveness of two early state policies targeting improved community college retention and graduation. Findings suggest that policies, even those crafted with attention to areas of student need such as financial aid, are not sufficient to effect real change. To understand why these policies had so little effect will require fine-grained studies focused as much on the students who did not succeed as on those who did. Researchers need to explore first-hand what factors led students to abandon their studies and what institutional strategies could improve the likelihood of students staying until graduation. Without close analysis of student perceptions of their unsuccessful or unsatisfactory college experience, it is unlikely that policy initiatives such as the ones described here will have the desired effect.

Appendix 1

Table 1

Independent-Samples t test for Graduation Rates for Oklahoma and Texas

		Graduation Rates					
		Oklahoma		Texas			
Population	Year	M	SD	M	SD	df	t
Black	2002	23.3	23.64	27.7	28.57	83	-.574
Hispanic	2002	28.7	21.03	27.2	26.55	87	.201
White	2002	33.2	21.62	26.7	26.99	91	.907
Total	2002	31.1	20.52	26.0	26.09	91	.731
Black	2006	27.1	20.91	21.7	24.56	87	.822
Hispanic	2006	37.8	30.27	26.1	23.73	89	1.672
White	2006	33.8	19.29	26.9	25.33	91	1.032
Total	2006	32.8	19.85	24.5	22.40	91	1.372
Black	2008	22.1	17.49	18.1	19.13	83	.767
Hispanic	2008	28.4	27.28	22.3	21.33	89	.971
White	2008	30.6	19.32	23.3	21.57	91	1.246
Total	2008	28.7	18.79	21.0	19.25	91	1.457
Black	2010	26.8	22.51	19.8	20.58	83	1.199
Hispanic	2010	29.7	24.05	24.0	22.40	87	.893
White	2010	32.8	21.92	26.4	22.40	89	1.048
Total	2010	31.0	21.61	23.0	20.31	91	1.411
Black	2012	22.1	17.73	20.8	22.92	84	.211
Hispanic	2012	29.9	25.47	28.0	25.42	89	.276
White	2012	30.8	17.83	25.8	21.76	90	.861
Total	2012	28.4	18.33	25.0	23.02	91	.567

*p < .05

Table 2

Selected Population Characteristics of Oklahoma and Texas

Year	State	Black (non-Hispanic)	Hispanic	White (non-Hispanic)
1990	Oklahoma	231,462	86,160	2,547,588
2000	Oklahoma	260,968	179,304	2,556,368
2010	Oklahoma	277,644	332,007	2,575,381
1990	Texas	1,976,360	4,294,120	10,291,680
2000	Texas	2,404,566	6,669,666	10,933,313
2010	Texas	2,979,598	9,460,921	11,397,345

Note: Adapted from Bureau of the Census (1991a, p. 29); Bureau of the Census (1991b, p. 69); Ennis, Rios-Vargas & Albert (2011, p. 6); Hixson, Helpler, & Kim (2011, p. 8); Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery (2011, p. 8).

Appendix 2

Figure 1 Grand Total Graduation Rates

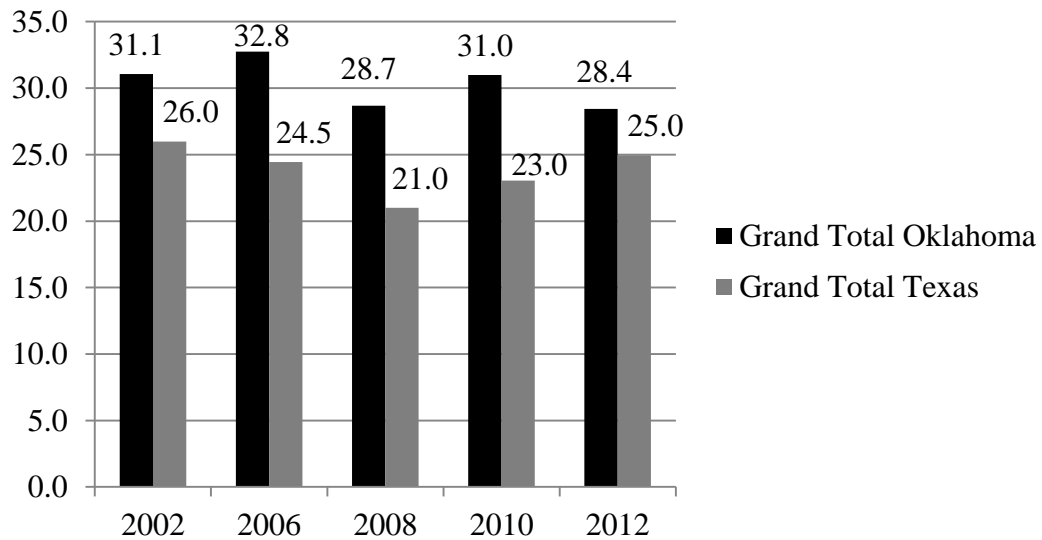


Figure 2 Black Graduation Rates

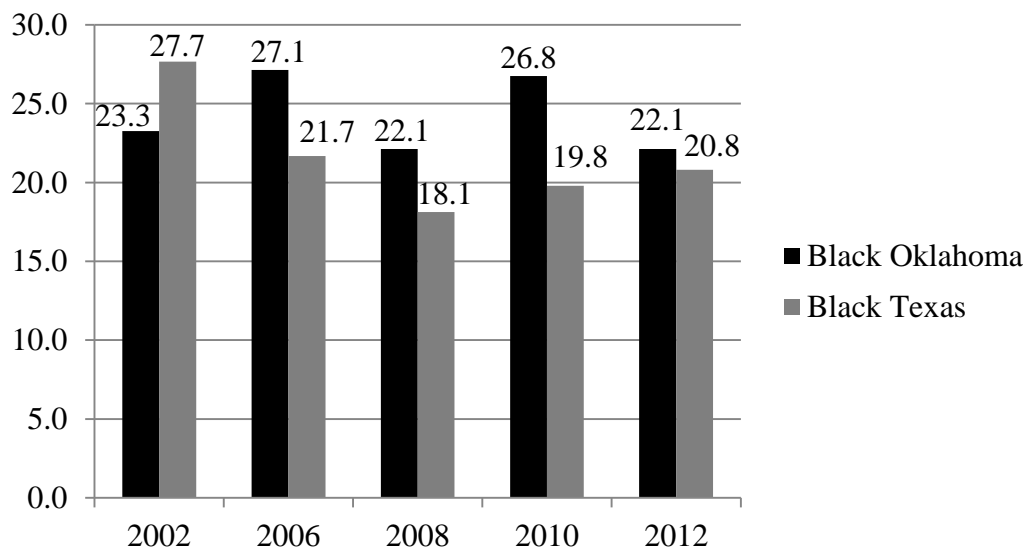


Figure 3 Hispanic Graduation Rates

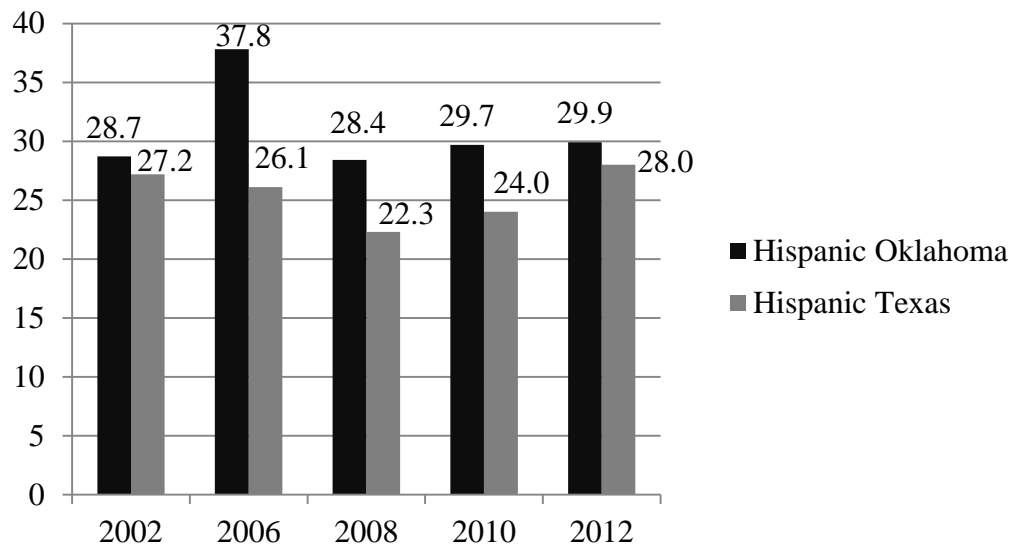
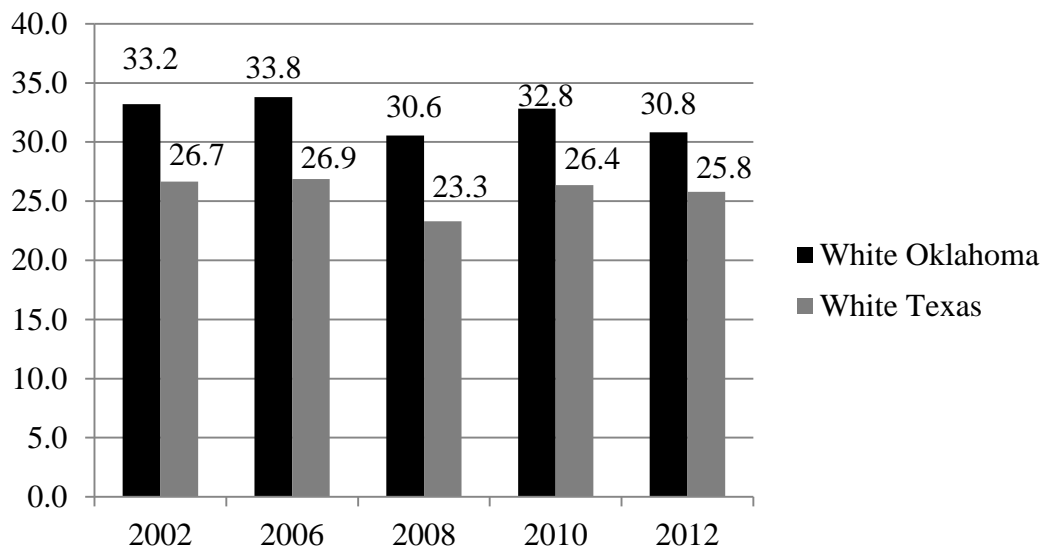


Figure 4 White Graduation Rates



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